Revisiting Richard McKeon’s Architectonic Rhetoric: A Response to ‘The Uses of "Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts’

David J Depew, University of Iowa

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/david_depew/51/
Reengaging the Prospects of Rhetoric

Current Conversations and Contemporary Challenges

Edited by
Mark J. Porrovecchio
Revisiting Richard McKeon's Architectonic Rhetoric

A Response to Richard McKeon's “The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts”

David Depew

Like several other essays that Richard McKeon wrote in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts” argues that the times call for rhetoric to become an architectonic productive art, as McKeon says it did on two earlier occasions: Rome as it morphed from republic to empire and the Renaissance as it tried to overcome the constraints of what it effectively and dismissively constructed as “the Middle Ages.” I will try to say what McKeon took an architectonic productive art to be, what these earlier eras had in common with his, and why McKeon thought that his time, unlike its previous analogues, called for an architectonic rhetoric that would take upon itself the offices of first philosophy, replacing metaphysics. I say “his time” intentionally. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge in the last four decades. So I will go on to reflect on whether time has brought forth what McKeon called for and whether his call remains timely today.

I begin with some reflections on the genre of this text. The speaker in this and many other McKeon texts is not an “I” but a channel through which some sort of “we” does the talking. This voice is fond of passive constructions and seems allergic to emotional appeals. One might be tempted to infer that this was simply characteristic of the man himself. In an earlier essay on McKeon, I noted the near disappearance of the first person even in a piece that purported to be autobiographical. Yet rereading “The Uses of Rhetoric” from a distance of almost forty years I have been struck by its tone of urgency. The intellectual history that warrants its call for a post-metaphysical architectonic rhetoric is not overtly founded, to be sure, in what to be done to resolve a particular issue that has presented itself to a well-identified here and now, as it would be in a straightforward piece of deliberative rhetoric. We will be forced to follow subtle clues in reconstructing what was bugging Richard McKeon in the 1960s and 1970s. Still, this is indeed a piece of deliberative rhetoric. Admittedly, the text’s tendency to move directly...
from history to call without pausing to identify a specific problem that licenses the speaker to issue a concrete solution picks up some overtones of the decidedly modern genre of the manifesto. In manifestos history itself is portrayed as already bringing forth a solution that the speaker, construed as a sign reader, is merely channeling. In McKeon's speech, however, it is people not history that are called upon to do what is called for and who might well fail to do it.

McKeon's call for rhetoric to be an architectonic productive art works against the background of Aristotle's influential distinction between scientific knowledge of invariant essences (epistêmê in the sphere of theoría), practical knowledge of how to behave on particular occasions without compromising ethical values (phronèsis in the sphere of praxis), and technical knowledge, which issues in products, procedures, or policies that reliably achieve their aim because they come about not by accident or rote training, but through "how to" knowledge of causes (technê in the sphere of poiesis). The standard translation of technê as "art" can be misleading. Even though he uses it, McKeon might well have pointed out that the narrowing of "art" to mean "fine art" is a legacy of the Renaissance. Accordingly, we must bear in mind that for Aristotle art names an intellectual virtue, an achievement so deeply founded in knowledge of causes that much of what we today call science Aristotle would have identified as technê.

Within this frame, McKeon wants to redeploy Aristotle's distinction between architectonic and subordinate arts. House roofers and dry wall installers are subordinate artists. An architect is, paradigmatically, an architectonic one. The former achieve their ends only if they are under the direction of the latter. For this very reason, Aristotle argues that as one goes down this hierarchy agency is reduced. A nurse is less active than a doctor. An ambulance chaser is less active than a partner in a law firm with oak paneled offices. It is likely by the same token that Aristotle would say that a professor of medicine or law is more active than a family physician or a practicing attorney. He might even say that a theory-informed rhetorical critic is more active than a speechwriter, best selling novelist, or daily newspaper journalist—a flattering idea to some who may be reading this chapter. His reason in each case would be that the marks of agency in the technical sphere are insight and inventiveness and that these qualities recede as routine "technique" prevails. Conversely, insight and inventiveness go up when knowledge of causes is brought to bear on problems and problematic circumstances. Hence Aristotle discounts not only dull routine, but also the accidental discoveries that are the stuff of which modern scientific myths are made. These are by definition no part of an art.

High-end medicine (iatrikê), legislative statecraft (nomothetikê), military strategy (strategikê), and rhetoric (rhetorikê) are Aristotle's paradigm arts. Does that mean that doctors, lawmakers, generals, and public speakers are practicing architectonic arts? These arts are certainly paramount in the technical sphere itself. The art of bridle making, Aristotle says, is subordinate to horsemanship and horsemanship to military strategy. But as we climb up from this and similar sequences into the sphere of normative action (praxis), Aristotle says that politics (polítikê) is architectonic over military strategy, lawmaking, medicine, and rhetoric. McKeon interprets this to mean that politics, since it plays an architectonic role in the sequence that runs from bridle making to horsemanship to military strategy, is in this respect not only an art, but an architectonic art, albeit an art that springs from and responds to the ethical norms of praxis.

This is a possible, but problematic interpretation of Aristotle. Even more problematic, but consistent with this reading, is McKeon's parallel claim that for Aristotle metaphysics, the highest of the purely theoretical sciences (epistêmê), can also serve as an architectonic art, albeit one that looks to and proceeds from theoretical knowledge. His argument is as follows. Aristotle clearly says that it is the politeikos or statesman who determines which arts and sciences are to be practiced in the state, by whom, and to what extent. But in so deciding, McKeon infers, the politeikos must consult the metaphysician to learn how to "organize sciences according to the principles, subject matters, and methods [of the] theoretic, practical, and productive sciences." This makes the consulting metaphysician the practitioner of an architectonic art.

Whether this is even a possible interpretation of Aristotle might be worth going into, but on another occasion. I mention it here only because it explains why McKeon claims that in the later twentieth century we needed rhetoric to become not simply architectonic, but an architectonic productive art. The addition of "productive" would be otiose to the point of nonsensical if arts are by definition productive; that is, if technê names the intellectual virtue that perfects one or another process of poiesis. That was, I believe, Aristotle's view. On McKeon's reading of the hierarchy of arts, practices, and sciences, however, it is a synthetic, not an analytical claim to say that arts are productive. They might be practical or theoretical too, as we have seen. McKeon has Aristotle himself, for example, calling for a theoretically oriented architectonic art that will govern both action and production. What this art might look like is a little unclear. It would probably look like the discipline-by-discipline survey of all that is known that pervades, even constitutes, the corpus Aristotelicianum, which Aristotle hoped would serve as the privileged framework of inquiry, governance, and technical skills in what was soon to be Hellenistic modernity.

Whatever a theory-oriented architectonic art might look like, though, McKeon was well aware that for Aristotle himself it would not look like
or be rhetoric. McKeon knew as well as anyone that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a line-drive argument asserting against Plato that rhetoric can be an art at all only if it is limited in scope and profoundly subordinate to *praxis* and *theoria*. Precisely the enlarged role for rhetoric that Aristotle ruled out in the waning decades of the fourth century BCE, however, is what McKeon was calling for in the waning decades of the twentieth century CE. Aristotle worked in a world whose lineaments he took to be as eternally invariant. In consequence, pure *theoria* must be invariant as well and so cannot be the object of either *teknē* or *praxis*, which Aristotle says bring intelligence to the sphere of the changeable.1 Moderns, on the other hand, live, move, and think in a cultural milieu in which change is assumed to be more basic than permanence.12 In this context, McKeon's call for rhetoric to become an architectonic productive art with a "theoretical orientation" means that in our technological age rhetoric must play the role that Aristotle assigned to theoretical philosophy. It must assume the burden of "producing subject matters and organizing them in relation to each other and to the problems to be solved."13

The accent here is on "producing." Instead of discovering or uncovering the eternally constant boundaries, principles, and domain-specific problems of the sciences, practices, and arts, rhetoric as a productive art with theoretical orientation must now create these very boundaries, principles, and problems. If problem solving requires crossing, blurring, erasing, or redrawing disciplinary boundaries, let them be crossed, blurred, erased, or redrawn. If it requires new techniques and technologies, let them be invented. This must be a rhetorical task because, as McKeon more fully argued in a closely related essay that he published two years later in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, rhetoric is inherently creative in ways that philosophy is not. It is at home with the fact that "we do not [now] find subject-matters ready made nor do we encounter problems distributed precisely in fields."14 Rhetoric employs commonplaces (*topoi*), not essential definitions, to frame issues, work through problems, and ground judgments.15 Focused as it is on judging cases, problems, and situations, topical argumentation does not swing wildly between essentialist certainties and the skeptical, positivist, or even nihilistic "revolts against metaphysics" that inevitably follow, as philosophy does.16

McKeon's argument for his call is based on an analogy with two prior eras in which in his opinion rhetoric had ascended from its usual subordinate position to serve as an architectonic productive art. The first case was the late Roman republic, in which rhetoric became an architectonic productive art with practical intent. McKeon, who was a better reader of Cicero than of Aristotle and indeed one of the best Cicero readers since the neo-Ciceronian Hume, saw Cicero as working to resolve pervasive problems of communication which, if solved, would lead to good judgment and wise political action in a world in which skepticism about the objective foundations of knowledge that Aristotle was the last great thinker to take for granted was so pervasive that it was dulling the native hue of resolution. Cicero's proto-pragmatic appeal to rhetorical norms of argumentation transformed Aristotle's distinctions between theoretically motivated questions about whether something is, what it is, why it is, and what kind of inquiry can answer questions about it into the four issues, *stases*, or constitutions that were eventually made canonical for rhetorical studies by Quintilian. Aristotle's four questions turned into the issues of fact, definition, significance, and forum, the latter determining what venue, court, or judge is qualified to hear the case at hand.17 In this and other essays in this period, McKeon repeatedly points out that in Cicero's practice-oriented epistemic regime commonplaces (*topoi*) replaced first principles by serving as means for inventing persuasive arguments addressing particular rhetorical situations. The relevant premises of arguments figure in enthymemes that apply these topics to cases. Whatever else McKeon's new architectonic rhetoric is to do, it is to argue in just this topical fashion.

McKeon's second case was the Renaissance, when rhetoric became an architectonic productive art with aesthetic intent. In the Renaissance, it was not only *theoria* that was missing, but *praxis* too. The monastic culture of medieval Europe had more or less destroyed the very notions of citizenship and political deliberation that had given Cicero his subject position. The problem now was to recreate a secular sphere. The Renaissance solution was to make rhetoric an architectonic productive art that would carry out the value-laden functions that had earlier been assigned either to theory or practice by distinguishing within the sphere of production itself between fine and vulgar arts and by extension fine and vulgar people. Our notion of what is architectonic about architects still reflects this turn. The creativity of fine artists—creativity is the Romans' new word for rhetorical *inventio*—is responsive to subtle norms of beauty in ways that house framers, roofers, and dry wall installers are not. The Renaissance thus gave us productive architectonic arts informed by what later was called aesthetics, thereby "reuniting eloquence and wisdom in [fine] art."18 Aesthetics prominently included belles lettres, the beautiful exemplification of literacy that stood in contrast to the ugly language of the Medieval scholastics. In modernity, aesthetics has professed the norms of taste, value, and cultural capital on which the modern social hierarchy itself rests.19 Since the seventeenth century, Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* have been interpreted in ways that bend them to this purpose.20

In spite of its distinguished career, McKeon intimates that this solution has failed. It has failed us because our technologically dominated world is now sundered into two noncommunicating subcultures.21 One is the aesthetic regime that evolved to deal with "values." The other is
the technoscientific sphere whose instrumental rationality brings with it seductions that aesthetic sensibility is never quite powerful enough to counter. The reason for this split, McKeon says, is that, having limited rhetoric to literary art, modernity’s technological arts developed without rhetoric. Accordingly, “The old dichotomy between eloquence and nature reappeared as a distinction between values and facts and between the humanities and other sciences.”

In developing this theme, McKeon cites the notorious midcentury “two cultures” disputation between the literary critic F. R. Leavis and the science-minded novelist C. P. Snow as an example of the problems he wants his architectonic art to help resolve. That this rift has not been resolved since he wrote, but has in fact has grown worse, is evidenced by the fact that the same issues recurred four decades later in the bitter “science wars” of the 1990s. If he had witnessed this unseemly episode, McKeon might well have remarked on the dishearteningly repetitive quality of debates that pit humanistically construed arts against technologically construed sciences. One lesson taught by “The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age” is that these debates can be expected to recur, giving off more heat than light, if we do not return for perspective, clarification, and new ideas to the older controversy between rhetoric and philosophy that gave them birth. Philosophy, after all, is the mother of the natural sciences and rhetoric is the mother of the literary humanities.

Here, then, is the current predicament as McKeon sees it: “As we enter into the final decades of the century we boast of a vast output in the arts, and we are puzzled by the absence of interdisciplinary connection and the breakdown of interpersonal intergroup and intercultural communication.” Note that McKeon takes communication breakdown to be the central problem. In this diagnosis he was consciously following the lead of his teacher John Dewey and other public intellectuals who in the wake of World War I believed that, in the famous line from Cool Hand Luke, “what we have here is a failure to communicate.” The same topical resources circulated after the World War II. On this view of things, which McKeon shares, communication breakdown has produced violence, mass murder, and injustice on a hitherto unimaginable scale. It now threatens nuclear annihilation. It follows (as it did for the academics who created the field of communication studies and resituated the dormant study of rhetoric, newly construed as a communicative art, within it) that restoring and enhancing communication is the path to safety.

McKeon argues that the solution to cultural fragmentation “in a technological age is technology itself given a rhetorical transformation.” Resources for refiguring technology rhetorically are springing up everywhere if we learn to look in the right places. “Our rhetoric,” he says, “finds its commonplaces in the technology of commercial advertising and the calculating machine.” He speaks of techniques in “public relations, propaganda, and political advertising” and of the rise of systems analysis and techniques of data storage and retrieval in corporations and other institutions. He might have mentioned the uses of psychotherapy and other dialogical techniques in the interpersonal sphere. Presciently, he notes the rise of computational arts “that are practiced by machines,” although he could hardly have foreseen the extent to which the digital revolution would transform our world and lead to the very kind of new technologically permeated interdisciplines for which he was calling, such as the “cognitive science” that now thrives at the boundary between digital computation, visual enhancement, and neurology. At the same time, McKeon was anxiously aware—this is, I think, the source of the urgency that permeates his essay—that none of these new tools, techniques, and technologies is by itself an art, let alone an architectonic art. Their potential as sources of invention and tools of inquiry cannot be realized unless and until a universal rhetoric of communication that is as philosophically ambitious as Cicero’s mitigates, mediates, and ultimately resolves the conflict between the humanities and technosciences. As a case in point, McKeon protests that sender-channel-message-receiver models of information flow will continue to treat communication merely as “the operation of a machine” unless the relevant technologies “are adapted to inquiry into what is the case” rather than as devices for breaking down, transmitting, and reassembling what someone (or something) said. (If ever anyone doubted that McKeon remained Dewey’s disciple, this remark should be enough to cause a change of mind.)

Because the rhetorical art he calls for is to have “a theoretical orientation,” assuming the office of managing disciplinary boundaries that Aristotle assigned first to philosophy, we might well ask what McKeon thought about the uses of twentieth century academic philosophy. Could it help create or even become such an architectonic communicative art? McKeon was cognizant of the powerful “linguistic turn” by which philosophers working in the wake of Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Austin were spurning speculation about things and introspection into private psychological processes and were turning instead to analyze the public truth conditions on which the very meaning of propositions depends and the ways in which speech itself performs actions. The ways of things, thoughts, and words are close to what Kenneth Burke, McKeon’s long-time friend, called “terministic screens.” They are ways of framing how questions are perspicuously asked and satisfactorily answered that hold sway in different cultural eras. Change from one terministic regime to another occurs when an argot that had once seemed fresh and revealing comes to be felt as stale and as a fetter on insight. In distinguishing the Fregelian-Russellian-Wittgensteinian-Austinian way of words from the Aristotelian way of things and the Lockean “new way of ideas,”
McKeon seems to have been struck by the fact that the twentieth century is not the first time in which the way of words had become ascendant. Intriguingly, it was also ascendant in the two prior periods in which, according to McKeon, rhetoric rose to become an architectonic productive art. The connection between the present and his two analogous eras now becomes clearer. McKeon seems to have thought that rhetoric cannot become an architectonic productive art unless and until it is linked once more with a linguistic turn of some sort.31

I have argued elsewhere that in linking the linguistic turn with his call for an architectonic art that would serve the philosophical needs of the present technological age, McKeon was influenced, though far from bamboozled, by the "philosophical semantics" that Rudolf Carnap brought with him to the University of Chicago, where McKeon was a dominating figure.32 Having arrived there in 1936 in flight from the Nazis, Carnap reformulated his logical positivist views about meaning and truth conditions in ways that resonated with the pragmatic strain in American philosophy. Specifically, Carnap thought (in a rather Kantian way) that (1) no empirical claim can be made without a conceptual framework and (2) empirical claims can be objectively true or false only if conceptual frames are arbitrary, content free, and devoid of truth-conditions. To use the simplest possible example, it is as true as true can be that two plus two equals four in a conceptual framework of whole numbers and a few formal operations on them, but there is no way of deciding the truth value of the framework of whole numbers or any other conceptual scheme and system of rules or ofrationally compelling someone to adopt one. They are products of invention and convention. It seems to me likely (I cannot prove it) that McKeon’s chosen name for his own approach to conceptual schemes, “philosophical semantics,” was appropriated from Carnap. There was, however, a big difference. Whereas Carnap’s, and after him Willard Van Orman Quine's, conceptual schemes were narrowly restricted to mathematical models and rules useful to the natural sciences—Quine once quipped that “philosophy of science is philosophy enough”—McKeon’s semantic schemes embraced all discursive practices and methods from theology and literature to politics, technology, and science.33

The key to McKeon’s philosophical semantics is found in his recognition that all discursive practices are constituted by arguments and that every argument consists in (1) a selection of terms; (2) the invocation of a premise; (3) the deployment of a method to link premise to conclusion; and (4) a conclusion that offers an interpretation of what is under discussion. McKeon identified four possible sorts of terms (things, thoughts, rules, and words themselves),34 four sorts of principles (holistic, reflexive, simple, and actional), four sorts of method (dialectical, problem-solving, computational, and agonistic), and four sorts of interpretations (noumenal or transcendent, essentialistic, substantive, and phenomenal). Although, as we have seen, selections are characteristic of whole eras, speakers and writers can be counted on to frame their arguments by spontaneously choosing principles, methods, and interpretations that differ in only one or a few respects from those adopted by their opponents. This makes for well-organized cases and perspiciously stated differences, since differences wider than that often fail to “statiate” around a clearly defined issue. But close contestation of this sort also leads those involved in debates and controversies to reify their schemes and to insist on precisely the wrong thing—the truth of the preferred conceptual scheme itself. Their opponents typically follow suit by seizing upon the arbitrariness of the frame in which a contested claim is encoded in order to discredit or marginalize not only the frame, but all too often the claim encoded in it. In doing so, they, no less than those they are challenging, turn frames into supposed facts, committing fallacies of misplaced concreteness with depressing regularity. Very often the driving motive for conceptual overreach is to gain control of a discipline by identifying one’s preferred framework, or paradigm if you will, with the boundaries of the field itself, thereby minimizing one’s exposure to refutation by refusing to confer standing (the stasis of forum or venue) on one’s opponents.

An example might help. Advocates of genetic reductionist versions of Darwinism encode claims about how DNA relates to genes, traits, and organisms in an atomistic conceptual scheme (actional principles, computational methods, substantive interpretations) in which genes are said metaphorically to be “selfish,” that is, to be naturally bent on replicating themselves.35 In this way “selfish gene theorists” explain phenomena that had remained puzzling to earlier Darwinians. They explain cooperation among social insects, for example, as a consequence of natural selection operating at the level of the level of additive genetic contribution to the next generation, thereby reconciling the cooperation, even altruism, we actually observe in nature with the Darwinian presumption of self-interest. It is not individual organisms that are self-interested, but genes.36 Opponents of the selfish gene hypothesis are often quick to point out how ill-founded and metaphorical the genocentric framework is. But in doing so its critics sometimes tend to overlook or marginalize findings, about cooperation, for example, that any acceptable alternative theory must represent as perspicuous and explain as persuasively as selfish gene the­ory does. Selfish gene enthusiasts, meanwhile, work as hard as possible to entrench their paradigm in the disciplines of evolutionary biology and psychology by wrapping it in heavy-metal metaphysical armor: material­ism and, most recently, atheism.37 In the heat of controversy opponents do not readily acknowledge that the arbitrariness they ascribe to the conceptual frameworks of others apply to their own schemes as well.
When extended beyond the range of the issues and cases they explicate perspicuously they all threaten to become empty and irrelevant generalizations. And so it goes, real knowledge precipitating out bit by bit only by a process in which the reach of the competing conceptual frames that encode small T truths is excessive in ways that later generations have no trouble spotting at a glance, but that participants in controversies defend to the death.

For McKeon, successful communication must now result from cultivating an art of recognizing that conceptual frames are conventional and, having done so, trying to find common ground, real hubs of disagreement, and hopefully shared judgments on the issues at hand, even if not on everything, or even anything, else. Separating conceptual frames from substantive proposals will help restore or advance communication across cultural and disciplinary divides because, once it is cultivated as an art, the habit of making frame-content distinctions will deter those engaged in controversies, as well as those judging them from the subject position of citizens and other interested publics, from demanding that their opponents must subscribe not only to a concrete point or policy, but, unreasonably, to the speaker's preferred conceptual frame or disciplinary rhetoric. The spirit of pragmatism survives in McKeon's proposal. It was no doubt propelled by his experience working with UNESCO after World War II.

McKeon's interpretive matrix emerged over a long period, but had been fully worked out by the time he wrote "The Uses of Rhetoric." Yet he does not mention it there. Indeed, most scholars who have developed, used, or defended McKeon's expanded semantic scheme have taken up its uses for philosophy, not its relevance to a new rhetorical art. His former colleague at the University of Chicago, Elder Olson, remarked that McKeon had "produced a key—hinting at the key—to all philosophy." According to his former student Walter Watson, McKeon's expanded philosophical semantics is "the most significant philosophical discovery of the present century." McKeon, he explains, discovered the grounds of philosophical pluralism, namely, "that the truth admits of more than one valid formulation and the reason for this fact in arbitrary and conventional elements inseparable from the nature of thought."

It is understandable that the implications of McKeon's interpretive schema for pluralizing philosophy would have come to the fore. He himself presented the most fully articulated version of his semantics in an essay devoted to its uses for philosophy. Nor is it difficult to see why his followers would stress this project. The issue of pluralism was very much on the minds of philosophers in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet even if McKeon himself tended to think of philosophical pluralism as different from his proposal for a new rhetorical art, the two are demonstrably intertwined. Rhetoric can have a "theoretical orientation" only if the traditional claims of philosophy to "preside over culture," in Richard Rorty's phrase, are diminished by conceptual relativity. Admittedly, a pluralistic philosophy is not the same thing as an architectonic art. But if this art is to assume functions that were performed by philosophy when the world was presumed to be static, it can press its claim to be a specifically rhetorical art only if the conversations it facilitates and the controversies it helps resolve make extensive use of the conceptual relativity thesis. It must do so in order to prevent discursive flow in contested situations from freezing up under the undue influence of illusory and excessive efforts to make one conceptual frame true for all contexts. It is just such excesses that characterize the "science wars" and "cultural wars" of our own times. McKeon wanted to put an end to such episodes. He thought rhetoric was up to the job. I would add: rhetoric only when it is freed from the shadow cast by philosophy's old ambitions.

At this point I would like to make a critical remark. McKeon's fidelity both to Dewey's project of reforming philosophy and to his own effort to revivify rhetoric seems to me a source of difficulty. The former gets in the way of the latter by underestimating the agonistic, situated, and contingent character of rhetorical invention, argumentation, and judgment. Philosophical appropriations of McKeon's work are typically in the service of a reinvigorated *philosophia perennis*. According to this view, when conventional elements are removed it can be seen that seemingly opposed philosophies are often saying "the same thing." This is a genuine aspect of McKeon's thought. Ever since studying with Etienne Gilson in post-World War I France, he had been attracted to the notion that convergent philosophies have emerged in all cultures and still illuminate the human condition. "The Uses of Rhetoric," however, makes a different claim. Even if it does not explicitly treat the semantic scheme as a resource for inventing new arts and arguments, McKeon's architectonic rhetorical art "with a theoretical orientation" must employ the interpretive resources of that scheme to find common judgments in situations in which differences are as important as samenesses, and vastly more important than the recurrent samenesses that a *philosophia perennis* prizes. "Rhetoric in all its applications," McKeon rightly notes, "focuses on the particular, not the universal." Yet in ways that McKeon does not sufficiently stress it seems clear that any such art must treat the relativity of frame to content not as a context-free philosophical discovery, but as itself relative to the specific rhetorical situations and controversies that the proposed art helps us negotiate. A rhetorical art with cognitive ambitions in a changing world whose cultural core is technologically permeated knowledge production will replace Cicero's and Hume's personal skepticism with a communal, constructivist, relativist, pluralist, pragmatic, transdisciplinary conception of knowledge. If this art does what it is supposed to do, it will be responsive to specifically rhetorical, not...
philosophical, norms of argument. This art will encourage, facilitate, and render intelligible, for example, an aspect of rhetorical argumentation that has been underplayed by many philosophers: the invention and deployment of the metaphors and other tropological figures that even in knowledge-oriented enterprises mediate between a conceptual scheme and a problematic site of inquiry. The catachrestic images of “selfish genes” and “natural selection” are cases in point.

Did McKeon’s proposal, we may now go on to ask, find resonance beyond his immediate disciples? One thing is for sure. Beginning in the 1970s, just after he published “The Uses of Rhetoric,” American and European modes of thought and expression suddenly took a decidedly antifoundationalist turn. It is worth noting that, whether he was as alert to this sea change as his own former student Richard Rorty, who developed an antifoundational philosophy that made use of some of his themes, McKeon was in fact participating in a cultural shift of some magnitude. Rorty originally undertook his neopragmatic project in order to pluralize philosophy by distinguishing, like McKeon, between skepticism and relativism. He persuasively argued that there is nothing in the nature of things that compels us to treat physical things as objects governed by mathematically precise laws and to treat persons only with empathic interpretive understanding. There is no reason, that is to say, to reify the boundary between the natural and human sciences. But in the end Rorty ended up leaving philosophy altogether and becoming a public intellectual who wrote on behalf of literary humanism. No solution to the two cultures problem there. Nor did he contribute to intercultural communication. Sometimes offensively, the subject position from which Rorty spoke as a public intellectual was that of American ethnocentrism rather than the cross-cultural universalism for which McKeon called.

Although there were no direct influences at work, some resonances between McKeon’s call for a universal rhetoric and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s call for a universal hermeneutic are also worth noting. Deeply aware that Aristotle’s technē had degenerated into technique, and so offered few reflective or resistive resources against moral failures on a massive scale such as the Holocaust, Gadamer sought to make the humanities less precious and aestheticist by thinking of language as something we use, but as a milieu that actually makes us into subjects by bringing us into a distinctly human world. Gadamer echoed his mentor Heidegger in saying, “Language is the house of being.” It followed that reappropriating the historical achievements of language would open a path leading to enhanced mutual understanding and communication among all humans and to resituating technoscience in a subordinate, almost premodern place in culture.

Like McKeon, as well as Paul Ricoeur, Gadamer looked to rhetorical theory and its history as affording the topological and tropological tools by which we mediate between innovation and tradition. Yet while he certainly provided a richer and deeper conception of rhetoric and its long, pre-aestheticist historical relation to the humanities than had been customary in the age of belles lettres, Gadamer did not open a path toward reconciliation with the natural sciences. That is perhaps because his rhetorical hermeneutics gave premodern tradition primacy over the claims of innovation to which the modern natural sciences justly lay claim. By following Heidegger’s reduction of science to technology, and treating the latter more as a way of darkening than of opening the world, Gadamer undercut the thorough conceptual relativity on which McKeon rightly insisted if scientific and humanistic cultures are to be given equal and intertwined standing as sites for inventive problem solving.

It is not surprising, then, that McKeon influenced the formation of the new field of rhetoric of science, notably in the pioneering work of Lawrence Prelli. The gambit of rhetoric of science is that in our post-Kuhnian times rhetorical norms of argumentation can better articulate and defend the claims of science than formal logic. The influence of McKeon, as well as of Rorty, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Stephen Toulmin, Kuhn, and others, was also work in the formation of the mid-1980s of the Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry (POROI), centered at the University of Iowa. Full reconciliation among the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as well as between technical and public spheres of discourse, is at the core of this interdisciplinary initiative. The hallmarks of POROI’s style of inquiry and criticism are to treat cases as more important than generalizations and to insist on clear writing across disciplinary divides. In pursuit of these goals, POROI has employed conceptions of rhetoric that can appear shallow in comparison with Gadamer’s depth hermeneutic. There are, however, reasons for this. In spite of their ingrained habit of regarding language as unproblematically representational rather than strategic, it is fairly easy to get scientists, both natural and social, to understand terms of art like topos, ethos, pathos, logos, and tropos and, in conversations with colleagues in other fields, to see that authority, emotion, and metaphor are involved in genuine argumentation wherever and whenever it occurs—in laboratories and scientific journals no less than in political debates, literary criticism, and theology. Accordingly, rhetoric of inquiry is not ontologically committed to classical and neoclassical rhetoric, but merely uses its language as a pidgin or Creole in the “trading zones” between disciplines and their cultures. Traditional rhetorical terms help move a conversation or a controversy forward by defamiliarizing claims that can then be reframed and retroped in more strenuous ways. These terms of art have proven surprisingly effective in demystifying fields such as economics, for example, which cloak power in mathematical formalism. McKeon’s influence went into these efforts.
Notwithstanding, the very simplicity, even superficiality, of rhetoric's traditional vocabulary has led Dilip Gaonkar to throw cold water on rhetoric of inquiry's and rhetoric of science's approaches to rhetorical criticism. He argues, first, that by purporting to explain everything in general a universal rhetoric explains nothing in particular, and, second, that you cannot get deep, context-dependent interpretations, judgments, and critiques out of terms and concepts that were designed merely to facilitate the limited, even pedagogical, productive art of giving speeches. One underlying reason for dissent of this sort is not hard to find or to appreciate. Among the stimuli to the antifoundationalist sea change of the 1970s were not only the critique of technocracy that arose in the wake of the Vietnam War and the expansion of the Civil Rights movement to address economic and cultural, and not simply legal and political, dimensions of injustice, but the rise of second wave feminism and of post-colonial cultural critique. In subsequent decades these discourses have totally reorganized American academic life. They have made it clear that claims and practices about gender roles, sexual preferences, and cultural privilege that seemed natural not only to Aristotle, but to Dewey, Gadamer, and McKeon himself are now inescapably recognizable as the work of convention. Since Foucault we have known that these prejudices have been made to appear natural by subtly dispersed forms of power that enter into the very formation of subjects. It is not to a depth hermeneutic along Gadamer's line that Gaonkar and others would call attention, then, but to an optic that sees into the deeper rhetorical processes that produce heterosexual normativity, gender roles, class positions, and the imperial gaze that underlies the very idea of race. In recent decades, rhetorical studies has been employing conceptual tools provided by appropriations of Nietzsche, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and others to bring these processes of subject formation to light. In this respect, rhetorical theory and criticism have been making use of the universal "grammatology" offered by post-structuralism to uncover a no less universal rhetoric that produces, through a pervasive "technology of deliberation," not speeches, decisions, or policies, but subjects themselves, who in this respect are effects of discourse rather than its causes or users.

It is also clear that the rhetorical technology of subject formation has entered into the sinews of nearly every science and form of inquiry. Thus any project for a rhetoric of inquiry or an architectonic productive art must be responsive to themes in contemporary rhetorical theory and critical practice in which discourse makes speakers at least as much as speakers make discourse. McKeon was prescient in seeing that it is not enough in our times to say that theoria must be displaced by praxis. Both must be displaced by technē. But there isn't even a hint in McKeon or his legatees that technē would enter into the making of subjects, agents, and speakers. True, the novel arguments of post-structuralism had not yet been invented. I suspect, however, that even if they had been the intellectualist, or one might say Aristotelian biases of McKeon's own subject position might well have blinded him to possibilities that so far have been better explicated by voluntarist forms of analysis, which treat us as desiring more than thinking animals.

I trace this difficulty to McKeon's assumption that a universal, if relativist, philosophy can coexist with an architectonic rhetorical art that harbors "theoretical orientation." Any rhetoric with philosophical ambitions must in the nature of things deconstruct rather than reconstruct philosophy, contrary to what McKeon, following Dewey, hoped. Until even the shadow of metaphysics is abandoned, in other words, prospects for the sort of architectonic rhetorical art for which McKeon called cannot be realized. In imagining such an art, I am far from concluding that McKeon's semantic system is necessarily caught in or limited to a logic of representation that takes the sovereign thinking and speaking subject for granted. Rather, an old saying might be germane to McKeon's call for rhetoric to be an architectonic productive art: "Be careful what you wish for. You might get it." I say this because a good case can be for judging that there is no better characterization of post-structuralist rhetorical theory and practice than as an architectonic productive art in which rhetoric displaces, rather than supplements or parallels, philosophy in producing and justifying claims to knowledge.

If this is so, consequences follow for recent rhetorical theory and criticism. It might seem at first sight that relativizing the claims of Nietzsche, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Butler, and other "post-humanists" to the rhetorical situations they evoke and the controversies in which they figure, as my version of McKeon's call recommends, might well have the effect of minimizing the profundity and permanence of the hard won and still culturally fragile insights generated by these thinkers. For this very reason, those who have painfully acquired the relevant insights—those, for example, who have denaturalized gender, sexuality, and cultural privilege—tend to assert the truth of these insights in a philosophical tone of voice. They absolutize, that is to say, the conceptual frames that help them encode these precious insights. They invest Saussurian linguistics, Lacanian psychology, and Derridan deconstruction, for example, with the same high degree of ontological commitment that they themselves criticize in the logocentric, androcentric representationalism that for so long rendered our critical knowledge of the discursive dynamics of race, gender, sex, and ethnicity inaccessible, illegible, and unintelligible.

The "science wars" suggest why this is a trap. When they realize that post-humanist critics are misperforming the decorous roles humanists are supposed to play while real knowledge is produced elsewhere, scientific opponents of post-structuralism (which they regularly confuse...
with post-modernism) emit angry spasms of uncritical representational realism. To verify whether the law of gravity is socially constructed, they taunt, perhaps you should try throwing yourself off a tall building. In this way, the two cultures debate has reared its ugly head once more. Is there any way, I ask in concluding, that we can clarify claims only by disputing about them. For its part, rhetoric of science claims that the epistemological and cultural interpretation of science will benefit from turning toward judgments of particulars and away from the residually telecentric ambition to reify and absolutize general theories. The same must be true of poststructuralist rhetorics. The insights they offer about the discursively performed lives of human beings are not especially safe in the hands of those who wish to find context-free philosophical, psychological, or linguistic grounds for them. In fact, to the extent that rhetorical studies is showing itself more effective in encoding these claims than related fields of inquiry it is a performative contradiction to say that something other than rhetoric licenses them. In this respect McKeon might not have known what he was calling for. But it turns out to have been a pretty good call anyway.

Notes


5. Ibid., 27a-b5.

6. It is far from clear in the passage on which McKeon relies (Nicomachean Ethics I.1.1094a1-10) that Aristotle is identifying a hierarchy exclusively composed of arts. The idea of a "practical art" was raised and debated in post-Aristotelian times. Eugene Garver, a former student of McKeon, has attempted with some success to clarify and defend this notion in Garver, Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).


9. McKeon's warrant for this claim is not a textual reference, but an argument to the effect that users of technai are themselves practitioners of an art ("The Uses of Rhetoric," 46). Textual support for that claim is not given and might be hard to find.


11. Nicomachean Ethics VI.3.1139b20-24. It is important to realize that for Aristotle the essential definitions or first principles that govern each sphere of knowable objects double as boundaries of the science of those objects. Aristotle is aware of what this claim implies: (a) There are no subject matters of science that exist apart from the science of those subject matters; (b) until the first principles of a discipline are fully articulated in an essential definition neither are the boundaries of the relevant inquiry well defined; (c) when these boundaries have been fully drawn they are irreversible. See Michael Peregrine, The Origins of Aristotelian Science (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991). An interesting twist on this view of science is found in William Whewell's Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences (1840). Whewell, a seminal nineteenth century philosopher of science, took even modern "inductive" sciences to be aimed at finding Aristotelian definitions of classes of objects. This led him so arduously to affirm the invariance of the world that he dissociated inductivism from empiricism, opposed the latter, and denied the very possibility of evolutionary theory on the definitional ground that species cannot change.

12. This is a point that Dewey made repeatedly. It was also made by Kenneth Burke.


14. Ibid., 57.


17. Ibid., 47. See also Richard McKeon, "Creativity and the Commonplace." The line of transmission from Aristotle to Cicero is a bit shaky. McKeon says nothing about the fact that the corpus Aristotelicum was unknown to Cicero. It was rediscovered by the violent Roman general Sulla in Cicero's own time, but not yet edited or republished. What Cicero knew of Aristotle were his epideictic speeches to general audiences, which were lost after the treatises were rediscovered and have never been found since, even though some of them have been reconstructed from bits and pieces.


21. Although we associate the notion that we live in a technologically dominated world with Heidegger's "The Question of Technology," it has been commonplace since the 1950s. Since McKeon says nothing to justify the claim, I presume he too is appealing to it as a topos.
23. Ibid., 50.
24. Ibid., 52.
25. Ibid., 52.
26. Ibid., 52–53.
27. McKeon, "Creativity and the Commonplace." References to this text are to its reprint in McKeon, Rhetoric, 34.
29. Ibid., 63.
30. Ibid., 57–58.
31. Ibid., 57.
32. David Depew, "Between Pragmatism and Realism," 45.
34. There is some ambiguity about a fourth sort of term in addition to the ways of things, thoughts, and words. Rules is a good guess.
35. I have developed this example in David Depew, "Darwinism's Multiple Ontologies," in Darwinism and Philosophy, eds. Vittorio Hoslé and Christian Illies (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005), 92–116.
41. There was, for example, a "pluralist" revolt in the 1980s against the hegemony of analytic philosophy in the American Philosophical Association. Subsequently, it occurred just when analytic philosophy itself was moving away from ordinary language philosophy back to new defenses of scientific rationalism. This shift sent ripples of fear through American pragmatists and Continental phenomenologists just when they were beginning to philosophically encode the insights of feminism and multiculturalism.
42. This point is most fully developed in Watson, The Architectonics.
44. McKeon, "The Uses of Rhetoric," 53.
Chapter 4

Our Premature Burial

A Response to Lawrence W. Rosenfield's “An Autopsy of the Rhetorical Tradition”

Robert S. Ilits

Lawrence Rosenfield’s sobering assessment of the state of the rhetorical tradition in 1971 focuses on the split between rhetoric and philosophy, and the consequences of that split for rhetoric. To build his case he provides a sweeping review of the history of the relationship between the two fields. Episodes in that history, he argues, posited either by philosophers or rhetoricians, had systematically rent the tongue from the brain, with the latter usually having gone to philosophy. Rosenfield’s survey of that history in this short essay is selective, with praise going to the ancient Greek conception of the individual speaker as empowered to address and move the polis, where common sense was the ground for politics, where spectacle enabled communal truth to emerge in its moment of display, and where exhilaration and curiosity over the wonderment of talk prevailed. He criticizes Plato's focus on being, Augustine's focus on divine revelation to the mind, Locke's focus on sense perception, and Hegel's substitution of "historical consciousness" for history.

In addition to addressing individual philosophers, Rosenfield assays the contributions of intellectual periods writ large to the demise of rhetoric. The scholastic tradition in philosophy detached thought "from the mundane realm of appearance," and discounted rhetoric for its concern with "the fleeting sector of public action." Under Enlightenment epistemology, renewed appreciation for the realm of sense perception revalued appearance, and brought to question principles established through tradition and history. Rosenfield notes Hannah Arendt’s influence on his argument by acknowledging her work in Between Past and Future (1961). Arendt also argues the point about being and appearance in The Human Condition (1958). Being and appearance became separate, Arendt argues, with a subsequent loss to the public sphere, when Adam Smith’s market economics reduced human action to the power to exchange material goods. The specific loss was to the “potentiality” of people coming together “in speech and action.”

Philosophy and science, equally committed to separating appearance from being, both came to disregard rhetorical theory because it presumed